From: "justicia allende" <jufora@hotmail.com> 5:42
Subject: Analysis of Food Crisis in East Timor
To: east-timor@igc.apc.org

Dear Friends,

The following is information and our opinion regarding the food crisis in East Timor. Please distribute the information to those who need it.

A luta continua !

FOOD CRISIS IN EAST TIMOR

1. The food crisis in East Timor has become an important subject of discussion recently. To respond to the crisis, several NGOs that are competent and experienced in dealing with problems of food and sanitation, such as Etadep, Care East Timor, Bina Swadaya, etc. formed a working group supported by international agencies, such as CRS, USAID and Care International. Yayasan HAK was involved in the initial meetings of the group to contribute some suggestions, but it is not directly involved in the task force to handle the food crisis in East Timor.

2. From the discussion held by different groups, including among the NGOs mentioned above, the extent of the food crisis affecting East Timor became more obvious. The worst area is along the northern coastal region from Tutuala, Lospalos District to Oe-kussi, and also in several regions on the southern coast, such as Viqueque District, i.e. Sub-district Lacluta (village of Luca, Lalerekmutin/Janda) and several villages in Sub-district Ossu.

3. In a discussion we held on April 18, 1998 we came to the conclusion that the food crisis in East Timor started several months after the Indonesian invasion of East Timor. Our analysis of the causes for the crisis is as follows:

a. The destruction of economic resources of the East Timorese is a result of the ongoing war. For a long time, the majority of the East Timorese have been peasants, cattle breeders, and fishermen. For the peasants, cattle is one of the main assets for use in cultivation, especially for plowing the field. Since the out break of the war, the number of cattle in East Timor has dropped drastically; most were slaughtered by the Indonesian military which thought that unleashed cattle were wild animals. Before the war, even though most of the agricultural production of the East Timorese was sufficient only for their own consumption and small-scale sales in the market, the people never suffered from a food crisis. They were self-sufficient in food. The cattle were vital economic assets for their owners because they could be sold anytime the owners needed money for the family and community. With the destruction of this particular asset, the people were forced to look for other kinds of work in order to fulfill their family needs. Yet they had limited skills in other occupations. The shift from agriculture to other work naturally caused a gradual decrease in the production of food.

b. There is prohibition for the people to travel beyond the border of certain hamlets.
In traditional agricultural patterns, the peasants rotated the cultivation between a number of different fields and constantly opened new fields to allow old ones to remain fallow. Thus, the location of

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some of their fields were far away from the community's settlement. After the war began, the military began to restrict the movement of the peasants beyond their villages. The people were only allowed to work on the fields near their residence. They could not choose to move a season's cultivation to a plot which was more fertile even though their old plots had already become overworked. This has resulted in a decrease in the fertility of the agricultural land and thus, correspondingly, in a decrease in the productivity of food production.

c. Besides the prohibition on their movements, due to security reasons, the Indonesian military has imposed a resettlement program. The military authorities have relocated people from areas under guerrilla control to areas that can be easily monitored by the military. In carrying out this resettlement program, the Indonesian military does not consider whether there is adequate fertile land to be cultivated surrounding the residential land. Since the military also restricts the movement of the relocated people in and out of the residential area, the people are given only a limited space for farming. Moreover, the residential area for the resettlement sites is often placed on farm land, thereby decreasing the amount of land available for farming.

d. The mismanagement of land use is worse when the residential area is constructed on top of agricultural land. The traditional pattern of settlement was that people would live on the slopes of the mountains because it provided a healthier living environment. The circulation of clear air was better on the slopes than in the valleys. The valley floors and the plains would be reserved for farm land.

e. While the Indonesian government prohibits the East Timorese from leaving their residential areas to search for more fertile farm land, it implements a transmigration program by settling Indonesian people from Java on the fertile land left by the East Timorese.

f. The presence of the Indonesian military throughout East Timor, even in the remote regions, has bred an intense feeling of fear among the East Timorese. This terror has caused the East Timorese who live in the villages to move to the cities, such as Dili, or other the district towns. Because of this large scale migration of people from the rural areas to the cities, the people have had to change their occupations from those of the agricultural sector to those of the trade and service sectors. All these people who have moved to the cities purchase their staple foods in the market. But the supplies of food are decreasing because of the decrease in agricultural land and the lack of human resources in the fields. These factors sometimes happen at the same time in the same village area, which contributes to the severity of the food crisis.

g. Besides the factors mentioned above, the food crisis has occurred because of the influence of urban lifestyles on the village society. Most of the people in the village live subsist with very little money, relying on production for subsistence. But they have been encouraged to consume products from the city. With the ongoing economic crisis, the prices of these products have soared beyond the reach of the village society while the demand remains the same. In some cases, people become tempted to use their earnings to purchase superfluities instead of food.

h. The economic crisis has caused an increase in the price of staple foods. The urban dwellers have also affected by the food crisis. The news about the food crisis in East Timor came to the surface only after the crisis hit the cities since the urban dwellers have more access to information and communication facilities. They are able to expose the

conditions of scarcity. But the fact that the villages have been suffering from scarcity from the onset of the war has not been revealed. This is obvious in the crisis in Atauro. Local government officials in Atauro have forced the inhabitants to tell outsiders that what is happening now is not a food crisis but a failed harvest and that the harvest failed only this year. The people are not allowed to speak about the chronic food crisis they have experienced over the previous years. Furthermore, when Jose Ramos Horta released the news about the food crisis in East Timor, the Indonesian government dismissed it out of hand, saying that he did not know the real conditions in the island-country.

i. The impact of climatic changes on the agricultural land has become more pronounced over the last decade. The rainy season has been coming later and later. This year, the rain only began to fall in the beginning of January 1998. The lateness of the rains contributes to the severity of food crisis in East Timor. The hysteria of the urban dwellers emerged not only in response to the food crisis, but also in response to the scarcity of drinking water. It was the latter crisis which awoke the high officials to the reality of the food crisis or, in their discourse, the "failed harvest." Before they never cared about the food crisis because they did not experience it. They have been eating three times a day, while the majority of the people have been eating only once a day or once in two days ever since the Indonesian invasion began. When people scream and yell about this, they are considered traitors to the state. This is what happened to
the village leaders in Atauro, Dili District and Aidabalate, Sub District Atabae, Bobonaro District. These leaders were reprimanded by the higher officials when they spoke up about the food crisis. They were accused of defaming the local government.

j. It is important to note here that the East Timorese were always able to maintain a sufficient supply of rice during the Portuguese colonial era. There were several centers of agricultural production that used to fulfill the rice needs of the whole population, which at that time numbered 700,000 people (almost the same number of people today). These centers were in Tunubibi and Cailaco in Bobonaro District, Natarbora in Manatuto District, and Uatulari in Viqueque District.

This is all of the information we can provide regarding the issue of food crisis in East Timor.

Dili, 23 April 1998

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